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ABSTRACT

Writing workshop is an approach that encourages students to become involved in the writing process by using their own topics and writing for their own reasons. A history of writing pedagogy shows that educators have recently moved from a skills based approach of teaching writing to a process based approach: teachers are now interested in showing how a piece of writing improves as the author consults with his or her instructor and peers. A literature review of research on writing workshops suggests several conclusions. First, there is adequate evidence to support the assertion that the teaching of writing process is a valuable practice. While the writing process is the actual process or material to be taught, the writing workshop can be viewed as a way of approaching the task of teaching writing and organizing it. Second, the establishment of the writing workshop can feel risky to teachers since there is no prescribed sequence for teaching skills and strategies. D. Sudol and P. Sudol (1991) raise significant questions regarding the tradeoffs among the level of teacher control, student responsibility, and the outcome value of the workshop. Third, the abundance of qualitative research (and lack of quantitative research) is due to the nature of the topic studied. The cyclical nature of the writing process and the writing workshop approach parallels the dynamic characteristic of qualitative research. Lastly, writing workshop, when implemented in its ideal form, takes a large portion of the instructional day. As a result of the literature review, recommendations are made for teachers, administrators, parents, school districts, state educational agencies, and future researchers. (Contains 42 references.) (TB)

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The Implementation of Writing Workshop:

A Review of the Literature

Lorie L. Strech
October 20, 1994

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According to the English-Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools (California Department of Education, 1987, p.1), education is currently "in the midst of a revolution - a quiet, intellectual revolution spinning out dramatic insights into how the brain works, how we acquire language, and how we construct meaning." This knowledge, which is based on current research in education and psychology, poses to educators the challenge of redirecting the goals and practices surrounding language arts curriculum. The English-Language Arts Framework proposes a language arts curriculum that is literature based, meaning centered, views writing as a process, and integrates the four modes of communication (reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

Although strong relationships exist between the modes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening (California State Department of Education, 1987), the focus of this paper will be writing as a process. This focus was chosen in light of the author's observations in the classroom.

A typical language arts lesson in the author's third grade classroom consists of reading aloud by the teacher and/or students, discussion, a teacher-posed topic for writing, and individual student writing time. While this lesson structure integrates the four modes of communication as proposed by the current Framework, instruction in the writing process is lacking.

Students in this class eagerly participate in the reading, speaking, and listening components of the language arts lessons. However, there is considerable resistance to writing. Writing time seems to be plagued with frustration for both the students and the teacher. Many students seem to be caught in a cycle of either not knowing what to write about in response to the teacher-given prompt or not wanting to put words down on paper in fear that they will be spelled incorrectly. Subsequently, a negative attitude towards writing seems to prevail.

In light of the author's observations of student behaviors during writing time, a need for a different approach to writing instruction became apparent. The writing workshop approach to teaching the writing process has become prevalent in many elementary schools as an alternative to teacher-dictated writing assignments. Writing workshop is an approach which encourages students to become deeply involved in the writing process using their own topics and writing for their own reasons (Calkins, 1986). According to Lucy Calkins, teacher dominated writing instruction suppresses children's writing. Calkins (1986) states, "The bitter irony is that we, in schools, set up roadblocks to stifle the natural and enduring reasons for writing, and then we complain that our students don't want to write. The cycle continues. After detouring around authentic, human reasons for writing, we bury the students' urge to write all the more with boxes, kits, and manuals full of synthetic writing stimulants (p.4)."

The importance of writing in the elementary school cannot be understated. It is a crucial component of literacy. Writing also provides a basis for learning and communicating in content areas such as mathematics, social studies, and science. All in all, this author believes that there is adequate evidence to support the need for educators to investigate writing workshop as an approach to teaching writing.

Statement of the Problem

The question that this paper will attempt to answer is: What are the implications of the implementation of a student-centered writing workshop approach (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983) in an educational system in which writing instruction has traditionally been teacher dominated (Fielding, 1992)? Before thoughtful recommendations for implementation can be made, a thorough knowledge of the writing workshop approach and its benefits for students is required. Using the work of Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, Nancie Atwell, and subsequent leaders in this approach, the components, structure, and underlying tenets of the writing workshop will be described and analyzed.

Definitions

This section will define several terms essential for understanding the literature involving the writing workshop approach.

Writing Workshop

(also called Writers' Workshop)

Writing workshop can be defined as a way of structuring classroom instruction in the writing process. Writing workshop is characterized by students choosing their own topics, working at their own pace, and conferencing in regards to their writing. It is a daily practice that integrates reading, speaking, and listening with the writing process. The basic components of the writing workshop include:

Mini-lesson (5-10 minutes)

The teacher teaches strategies and skills for students to use in their writing.

Status of the Class

Students report their plans for writing time during this component.

Writing Time (20-30 minutes or longer,depending on grade level)

Students write or conference (with the teacher or other students) during this time.

Group Share (10 minutes)

During this stage there is a whole group sharing and discussion of writing. Two to three students share each day.

This general format for the writing process approach gained initial momentum as a result of the work of Donald Graves (1983), Lucy Calkins (1986), and Nancie Atwell (1987).

Writing Conference

According to Lucy Calkins (1986), a writing conference is a teacher and child meeting to discuss the child's writing. The teacher's role during the conference is "to interact with students in such a way that they learn how to interact with their own developing texts (p.120)."

Donald Graves (1991) defines a writing conference as a meeting between the teacher and child during which the following questions are discussed:

"(1) Where did the piece come from?

(2) Where is the piece now?

(3) Where will the piece be going (p.89)?"

Parry and Hornsby (1985) define a writing conference as "the means by which the child discovers, clarifies, and refines what he or she wants to express. It is also the means through which the child comes to grips with the actual process being used and learns his or her areas of strength and weakness (p.19)."

The above definitions imply a self-evaluation of the writing. In the teacher-student conference, the teacher does not become the proclaimer of mistakes, but acts as a facilitator of the child's thinking processes about writing.

Calkins (1986) differentiates teacher-student conferences according to the purpose involved (design, process, evaluation, editing). Many authors on this subject recognize several other types of conferences in the writing workshop including peer, small group, and whole group conferences (Parry &

Hornsby; Calkins, 1986; Lensmire, 1992). However, the most common type of conference in the literature is the teacher-student conference.

Writing Process

Lucy Calkins defines the writing process as "a process of dialogue between the writer and the emerging text (p.19)."

Freedman, Dyson, Flower, and Chafe (1987) describe writing as a process which requires active and complex problem solving by using different procedures in a recursive manner.

Both definitions recognize that the process is not a linear one. Writers revisit different steps in the writing process as needed.

Steps in the Writing Process

Prewriting

(also called rehearsal)

"The thinking that we do before we write."

(Wetzel, 1992, p.11)

"...activities such as brainstorming, class discussion, free writing, drawing or doodling, visualizing, or just plain thinking. Its purpose is to stimulate the flow of ideas." (Wasson, 1993, p.17)

Although Wasson's description of prewriting is more explanatory, both definitions acknowledge that it has a precursory relationship to writing. This step can be revisited numerous times during the writing process.

Composing

(Also called drafting or writing)

"...the actual writing of words."

(Wetzel, 1992, p.11)

"...the stage in which the ideas generated in the prewriting stage are transferred to words on paper." (Wasson, 1993, p.19)

Both definitions adequately explain this stage in the writing process. Calkins(1986) and Graves(1983) characterize this stage as a time to take chances by writing freely. Spelling and mechanics are not a main concern at this point in the student's work.

Revising

"...taking action to develop and improve the expression of our ideas." (Wetzel, 1992, p.12)

"I reread what I have written, re-seeing what I have said; the writing becomes a lens. I revise, and by moving the words on the page and looking through them at my unfolding subject, I explore, and discover what I have to say." (Calkins, 1986, p.17)

Although Wetzel's definition is more succinct, both definitions imply a focus on ideas within the writing: Revising is a time to critically read the piece and can take place in a cycle as the writer moves through the steps of the process.

Editing

(also called proofreading)

"...the time to check for misspelling, punctuation, capitalization, and complete sentences." (Wetzel, 1992, p.12)

Calkins (1986) suggests that editing be done when the piece is ready to be published and read by others. Editing serves the purpose of facilitating the communication of the written message to the reader.

Publishing

"...the time that authors share their work with others."

(Wetzel, 1992, p.12)

"Publishing means 'to make public.' Consequently, publishing may take many forms varying from simple oral reading to sophisticated productions requiring a team of people." (Parry & Hornsby, 1985, p. 25)

The above definitions imply the act of sharing the final product. This sharing with others gives the student an authentic purpose for writing (Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983).

Historical Basis of the Writing Process Approach

It is important to comprehend the developments of the past twenty years in research and practice regarding writing in order to understand the tenets of the writing workshop. This section will examine research and practices in writing instruction from the 1970s to the 1990s.

According to Kent Gill (1993, p. vii), "The past two decades have seen a revolution in the teaching of writing." The emphasis of research has shifted from products to the process of writing (Nystrand, 1989). This shift in research focus parallels the current emphasis on the link between writing and higher order thinking skills.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, many researchers and practitioners held a skills-based position of writing (Bloom, 1976; Becker, 1977; Becker & Carnine, 1980). According to this position, the teacher should follow a rigid, prescribed sequence of skills in literacy instruction. In classrooms using a skills-based curriculum, writing consisted mostly of isolated skills worksheets or grammar drills (Fielding, 1992). According to Graves and Stuart (1985), this type of writing instruction "prevents children from using important thinking skills, such as organizing, analyzing, interpreting, and evaluating information (p.14)."

By the early 1980s, the failure of schools adhering to the traditional skills-based curriculum in meeting the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students became apparent (Heath, 1983). In 1982, the National Council of Teachers of English published The Essentials of English which proposed an instructional emphasis on the functionality, communicative nature, and lifelong utility of all the language arts. Soon thereafter, the philosophy known as whole language gained credibility (Goodman, 1986). Bergeron (1990) describes whole language as "the use of real literature and writing in the context of meaningful, functional, and cooperative experiences in order to develop

students' motivation and interest in the process of learning (p.319)." The philosophy is based on the premise that students should become literate through meaning-based and purposeful reading, writing, speaking, and listening. According to Fielding (1992), classroom literacy workshops, such as writing workshop, is consistent with the whole language view.

The shift from skills-based to whole language/ writing process approach brought about a shift in the type of research conducted. Much of the research behind teacher-directed skills instruction is quantitative in contrast with the qualitative, case study format characteristic of whole language practices and writing process approach (Fielding, 1992). In addition, more educators in the field are conducting case study research through the reflective practitioner model (Schon, 1990) as opposed to professional researchers conducting the quantitative studies.

Overall, present research tends to be qualitative in nature and continues to lean towards a whole language stance. This author believes that educators and researchers will continue to study the writing process in an effort to improve instruction in all classrooms.

Major Contributors, Controversies, and Issues

The major contributors to the literature pertaining to the writing workshop approach are Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and Nancie Atwell. Each of these individuals have published books describing their own qualitative research. This research is portrayed by narrative descriptions and reflections on the teaching of writing through writing workshop. The books of Graves, Calkins, and Atwell form the basis for many of the current advances in writing instruction. Subsequently, these books have been called "the handbooks of the new pedagogy (Sudol & Sudol, 1991, p. 292)." It is important to discuss the texts of these three prominent authors in order to understand the contributions of each.

Donald Graves is perhaps the pioneering contributor to writing workshop literature with his book Writing: Teachers and Children at Work (1983). In this book, Graves describes the writing workshop approach at the Atkinson Academy in Atkinson, New Hampshire. Graves characterizes and reflects upon the classroom environment, stages of writing, and instructional practices of the workshop in this elementary setting. This book lays the foundation of theory and method for those considering the implementation of writing workshop.

While Graves addresses numerous issues in his discussion of the writing workshop (such as spelling, skills instruction, conferences, etc.), Writing: Teachers and Children at Work is not intended to be a step-by-step manual for teachers. Although this text serves as a theoretical and methodological basis for the writing workshop, it has been characterized as an inadequate guide for teachers when used as a sole means of information (Sudol & Sudol, 1991) and should be used as intended by the author.

Donald Graves has more recently published a series of five books for teachers aimed at establishing a literate community within the classroom. Unlike Writing: Teachers and Children at Work, these texts deal with the

teaching of both reading and writing. The books contain methods and practices which use teacher literacy as a springboard for student reading and writing. These titles include: Experiment with Fiction (1989), Investigate Nonfiction (1989), Discover Your Own Literacy (1990), Build a Literate Classroom (1991), and Explore Poetry (1992).

Lucy Calkins, a former classroom teacher, worked with Donald Graves in the Atkinson Academy Study. The results of her research at this site were published in Lessons from a Child (1983). This book is a case study of the writing development of a single child over the course of the third and fourth grade. Her qualitative style of research closely parallels that of Graves. Subsequent books by Calkins expand upon her findings in 1983.

The Art of Teaching Writing by Calkins (1986) characterizes many different classrooms and studies of writing with children. In this book, Calkins provides reflections on writing theory and instructional practices based on her continued work in elementary and early adolescent classrooms.

Calkins' most recent book, Living Between the Lines (1991), serves as an extension and revision of her earlier work and the work of Graves and Atwell. In Living Between the Lines, Calkins asserts that a deep focus on the link between writing and living should be central to the writing workshop. She proposes the use of individual notebooks for students to record personal life experiences. These notebooks form the basis of writing endeavors in the workshop. Calkins (1991) claims that personal writing using the notebooks encourages writing "endeavors of scope and significance (p. 6)". This is based on the notion that writing is inseparable from the experiences of life.

Calkins' concentration on personal writing has been the subject of controversy. One criticism of Calkins' attention to personal writing is that a focus

on one type of writing can discourage or hinder the use of other forms, such as expository or fiction (McCarthey, 1994; Smagorinsky, 1987). Another criticism arises from the potential emotional consequences that personal writing may create (McCarthey, 1994). Students constantly encouraged to write about a life that may be plagued with painful personal problems may begin rely on teachers to act as therapists.

Nancie Atwell is another major contributor to literature pertaining to writing workshop. Her book, In the Middle (1987), is an in-depth narrative of how a successful writing workshop was conducted with early adolescents. It presents practical ways to evaluate students, keep records, organize the classroom environment, and handle conferences. Atwell (1991) describes the writing of In the Middle as an attempt "to present teaching as an intellectual process but in a practical way (p.136)."

Side by Side: Essays on Teaching to Learn, also written by Atwell (1991), contains chapters on various topics relating to the teaching of reading and writing. Its purpose is to challenge literacy programs that focus on teacher-directed instruction. Atwell asserts that this type of instruction creates a distance between teachers and students. Another purpose of Side by Side is to motivate teachers to become active observers of student literacy and participants in writing and reading.

There are several issues which arise in the literature pertaining to writing workshop. One important issue is the instruction of necessary writing skills and strategies within the student-centered workshop. In the traditional, teacher-directed method of teaching writing, skills are taught in isolation and in a predetermined sequence. In this traditional type of classroom, there is high teacher input and low student input (Calkins, 1986).

In an attempt to implement change, teachers might be apt to read the work of Calkins, Graves, and Atwell which advocate student-selected topics, student conferencing, and student ownership of writing (high student input) and assume that they should not teach any skills or strategies for writing directly. According to Calkins (1986), teachers should teach skills within the context of the writing workshop. A successful workshop is one in which there is high student input and high teacher input. Calkins(1986) puts the teacher's role in perspective by stating "We need not be afraid to teach, but we do need to think carefully about the kinds of teacher input which will be helpful to our students (p.165)."

According to Graves (1983), Calkins (1986), and Atwell (1987), skills in the writing workshop classroom are taught directly to the whole class during daily mini-lessons and as needed during individual writing conferences. Skills should be taught in the context of what the students are writing. Therefore, students see the skills they are taught as necessary and useful for improving their written communication. In support of these contentions, research by Danoff, Harris, and Graham (1993) provides evidence that direct instruction during mini-lessons can improve the quality of student writing.

Another issue that arises in the literature is the social dimension of writing in the writing workshop. According to Graves (1985), "Writing is a highly social act in writing process classrooms (p. 193)."

In a writing workshop classroom, children write for an audience (peers and others). Writers that write for a real audience (instead of writing solely for evaluation as in the traditional classroom) belong to a community in which written communication is embedded in context (Ackerman, 1990). According to Hull and Rose (1989), writers tend to adopt the language of the writing community in order to establish group membership. The writing workshop

approach facilitates this sense of community, group inclusion, and purposeful use of language through peer conferencing and the publishing of student writing.

While there are many positive links between writing and social relationships, there are concerns regarding the social forces in a classroom writing community. Dyson (1989) asserts that a peer audience can create "social energy" to empower young writers. However, this same peer force can also stifle writers through teasing and conflict (Lensmire, 1992). According to Harris (1989), we "write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say (p.12)."

The next section of this paper will extend the discussion of the major contributors, controversies, and issues through a thorough synthesis and analysis. The work of Graves, Calkins, and Atwell will be compared and contrasted in an attempt to find significant commonalties and differences in their research.

Synthesis and Analysis

There are interesting connections between the work of Donald Graves, Lucy Calkins, and Nancie Atwell. Both Calkins (1986; 1991) and Atwell (1987;1991) credit Graves as a contributor to their work. In turn, Graves wrote the foreword to Atwell's In the Middle (1987) and refers to the work of both Atwell and Calkins in his recent series of books. All three of these authors credit Donald Murray (Pulitzer-Prize winning writer) as a mentor in the writing process. Since these leaders in the field have based much of their work on the work of one another, it is not surprising to find a high consensus between them on the tenets of the writing workshop.

Graves, Calkins, and Atwell tend to agree that students should chose their own topics, be taught skills in context, publish for an audience, and take part in writing conferences. Graves, Calkins, and Atwell contend that it is crucial for teachers to share their own writing endeavors during writing workshop and model literate behaviors. Donald Graves is especially adamant on this point and dedicated one of his books, Discover Your Own Literacy (1990), to this premise.

All three authors call for an adequate block of time to be set aside for the writing workshop. Calkins (1986) specifically emphasizes this point by stating that children "need the luxury of time...they need long blocks of time (p.23)" for writing. Graves (1991) proposes several ways to reduce interruptions and transitions during the writing workshop so that writers can work diligently.

In their more recent books, Graves (1991), Calkins (1991), and Atwell (1991) reflect upon their past work and suggest improvements and revisions in the specifics of writing workshop. All three authors have expanded their focus to include more connections between writing and reading. This expansion is especially evident in the work of Graves.

The point of view from which the authors write is different. Graves and Calkins write from the perspective of qualitative researchers working with children. In contrast, Atwell writes from the position of a classroom teacher. According to Sudol and Sudol (1991), In the Middle was Atwell "sharing an inside view (p.293)."

The children with which these authors worked with differ in age. Graves and Calkins focus primarily on elementary classrooms while Atwell writes mainly about her experiences in the middle school.

All three authors describe their research in narrative form. It is qualitative research with little attention given to quantitative research methods. This qualitative research approach is characteristic of literature pertaining to the writing workshop approach.

The literature pertaining to writing workshop is abundant in the areas of elementary education. While Atwell describes early adolescent writers, very little attention is given to the writing workshop at the high school level.

The literature is very thorough in presenting encouraging success stories of the writing workshop, however, it seems to be lacking in suggestions for teachers who are dealing with off-task students, severe behavior problems, or administrative resistance. Shortcomings such as these are discussed by Sudol and Sudol (1991) in their examination of the implementation of Graves, Calkins, and Atwell in the realities of a less than ideal classroom setting.

Overall, much of the research and literature pertaining to the writing workshop continues to support a student-centered environment. While much work has been done in classroom dominated by native English-speakers, research in classrooms with linguistically diverse students is lacking. Thus, a new area for exploration regarding the writing workshop is open researchers for to pursue.

Conclusions

As a result of this author's review of the literature regarding the writing workshop approach, several conclusions can be reached.

First, there is adequate evidence to support that the teaching of the writing process is a valuable practice (Graves, 1983; Graves & Stuart, 1985; California Department of Education, 1986; Calkins, 1986; Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1991; Fielding, 1992). While the writing process is the actual process or material to be taught, the writing workshop can be viewed as a way of approaching the task of teaching writing and organizing for it. Few other approaches to teaching the writing process have received as much attention in the literature as the writing workshop approach.

Second, the establishment of the writing workshop can feel risky to teachers since there is no prescribed sequence for teaching skills and strategies. Another area in which teachers may feel uncertain is with the possibility of students being off-task during the writing time while the teacher is engaging in conferences. In their review of the implementation of the writing workshop in a fifth grade classroom, Sudol and Sudol (1991) raise significant questions regarding the tradeoffs between the level of teacher control, student responsibility, and the outcome value of the workshop.

Third, it can be concluded that the abundance of qualitative research (and lack of quantitative research) is due to the nature of the topic studied. The cyclical nature of the writing process and the writing workshop approach parallels the dynamic characteristic of qualitative research. Thus, the lack of quantitative research should not be seen as a disadvantage to the field but as a logical and conscious omission due to the nature of the topic studied.

Lastly, writing workshop, when implemented in its ideal form, takes a large portion of the instructional day. With a crowded elementary curriculum,

this raises the concern of educators who feel that there is not an adequate block of time in the day (Sudol & Sudol, 1991). However, with the continued push for integration of curricular areas, writing workshop mini-lessons can be easily and meaningfully linked to content areas. This could spark an idea and lead students to voluntarily choose topics to write about in the content areas. Educators have reported success in integrating writing workshop with other curricular areas including science (Bower, 1993) and art (Ernst, 1994). Integrating writing workshop with other subject areas, while still adhering to the basic tenets of the approach, gives educators a viable way of covering grade level content areas.

Recommendations

As a result of the author's review of the literature pertaining to the writing workshop, several recommendations can be made. These recommendations are for teachers, administrators, parents, school districts, state educational agencies, and future researchers.

It is this author's recommendation that teachers commit a daily block of time to the writing workshop. It is important for teachers to realize that implementing the writing workshop is a process, synonymous to an interaction between teacher, students, and written texts. Detailed long-term lesson plans may serve to hinder the workshop. Instead, teachers should have in mind a general direction for the workshop and a checklist of skills and strategies to cover as they arise within the school year. Teachers implementing writing workshop should meet regularly with other teachers at the same point in implementation and others with a well-established workshop in order to gain peer support and a network of successful ideas.

Administrators should establish ongoing in-service training in writing workshop practices for all teachers. Since it is not a prepackaged curriculum, teachers need to learn the theories supporting the practice and have opportunities to rehearse and reflect upon successful teacher behaviors in the workshop. Teachers should be given release time to observe classrooms where writing workshop is established and successful. Administrators should also evaluate program goals to assess the degree to which the school's program and practices support the tenets of the writing workshop. Furthermore, parent education workshops dealing with ways parents can foster writing at home should be offered by the school.

Parents may play a positive role in the writing development of their children when involved in writing themselves (Jones, 1990). Parents should

model uses of writing at home and be encouraged to write and share pieces using the writing process. Parents should be encouraged to spend time involved in the classroom writing workshop. Working as a parent volunteer during writing workshop can be a positive experience for both parent and child (Baker, 1994).

School districts and state educational agencies should provide more intensive training in writing workshop theory and practices. In addition, elementary curriculum should be restructured around the daily writing process so that writing and reading are central to learning in all subject areas.

Future researchers should conduct more research on the specific gains of larger populations (such as groups of several classrooms or schools). Longitudinal studies are necessary to assess long-term outcomes on writing. In addition, more research needs to focus on bilingual, sheltered-English, special education, and various other settings.

In closing, this author believes that the writing workshop is an exceptional practice for teaching the writing process. It is consistent with current theories on student-centered learning and whole language. Overall, it is empowers students and teachers to become competent and self-directed writers.

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